

**Lakewood Presbyterian Church
Cathedral Builders**

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Sermon 4/20/08**

Scripture: Acts 7:51-60 – The Stoning of Stephen

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.

When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I see the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’ But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he died.”

It figures that for my first sermon here at Lakewood
The lectionary text would be the Stoning of Stephen,
The first martyr of the early church.

For while I may have moved across the country to serve this church
It was only by the existence of direct flights home that I could convince myself to do it
And it took me a few years to even open my mind to the idea of leaving my native land.

I am no good at laying down my life for my faith.
And it’s really not something Christians in America have to do.
Being part of the dominant culture and all.

So it just figures, for my first preachin’ words to you,
I would be reading this story:
Old Stephen and The Angry Mob.

But, I love digging deeply into a confusing story
One that’s hard to read in our time.
So, let’s go there, why don’t we?

When I read this story, I have to say
Most of my questions are about the Angry Mob.
What has got them so out of sorts?

And while I'd like to have the lay-down-my-life faith that Stephen has,
And sometimes I do,
Sometimes, I'm Angry Mobster #24,
Complete with gnashing of teeth and hands over my ears.

Sound familiar?

They don't want to hear it, you know,
What Stephen is saying.
He just spent a whole Bible chapter reminding them
That they have been messing up for centuries.

From what I can tell this is a Jewish crowd,
Some priests and a council and just a bunch of people
And Stephen, in his zeal, to get them to listen about the truth of Jesus,
Reminds them just how bad they are
Thousands-of-years-bad
At listening to God's prophets.
"You're the big idiots who doubted Moses in the wilderness," he says,
"Your ancestors were so dense they persecuted prophets"
"and you all don't even listen about Jesus!!"
Yep, Stephen has been talking a lot of smack.

He's trying his best to get them to listen, I understand.
But seriously, it is hard to stand there and hear just how stupid you have been-
For generations.

How about a little sympathy?
It can be hard to believe the truth –
Especially when it looks like 40 years in the wilderness with only manna to eat
When the temple of your God has been destroyed
And this new one they're saying is the Messiah
Wandered around with lepers and prostitutes
Then he died on the cross
And now all these apostles are running around stirring things up
Challenging the status quo – you know, having all their possessions in common and
all of that.
This life of faith in Jesus Christ, if we're honest, looks kinda strange
and kinda scary.

So what I'm saying is, I can understand how it would be hard to believe Stephen
How he would make them pretty mad
And they would just want to cover their ears and make him stop.
I'm not justifying a stoning here, let me assure you.
I'm just saying, I can understand where the Angry Mob might have been coming from.

But beyond Stephen's indictments about not listening to prophets,
Once the Mob is already gnashing its teeth,
He adds this to the mix:

“Look, I see the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!!”

It is his declaration about Jesus and his divinity,
Stephen’s truly spiritual, and radical moment.

And the Mob wants nothing to do with it.
This is when they really cover their ears.
They don’t want to hear it.
They don’t want to see it.

You see, Stephen has a vision of a new way.
A new kingdom and just what God can do.
The Son of Man, Risen from the dead, sitting there with God.
He sees them reigning there together.
Stephen, with the help of the Holy Spirit,
Looks far beyond the present moment where he is surrounded by Angry Mobsters
Toward a truth about the coming of a new kingdom.

Stephen is in this moment a visionary
Holding onto something the crowd does not yet want to see
Or can’t.

In recent years the business world has adopted a catchy term for its visionary leaders:
Cathedral Builders they’re called.
The term was first used by a management guru and social philosopher named Charles
Handy.

Cathedrals inspire.
Those who first worked on them knew for certain
that they would never see them finished.
Listen again:
Those who first worked on them knew for certain
that they would never see them finished.
We may not need any more cathedrals
but we do need cathedral thinkers,
people who can think beyond their own lifetimes.

And so the thinking goes that businesses need these kind of visionary leaders.
You know, for long-term viability, to build sustainable business models.

An example of one of these leaders is given:

Richard Branson, of Virgin Airlines, etc. – he bought back his company because
shareholder pressure meant he was unable to indulge in the businesses that
fascinated him and that would need long-term investment. So he’s got an airline and
media business, and I guess some trains and who knows what else. Sometimes people
think these modern-day cathedral builders of the business world are a little crazy. A
quote on Branson - "People are criticising his trains at the moment, but he says he

has taken a bet that within five years he can turn them around. But he admits that the trains are not going to make money for him for 20 years. He's building a cathedral in a way."

OK, so maybe the analogy falls apart a little bit when we start comparing trains to cathedrals which were built to inspire the awesomeness of a huge and amazing God.

But that idea of cathedral building holds its weight, I think, here where we live. Somewhere between the first fruits of God's kingdom and its coming into its fullness. You see, we too, are called to hold the vision. To be cathedral builders, in some way, like Stephen. To say, God has promised a new thing, A new way, a new kingdom in the Risen Christ. There may be sin and pain and chaos in the world now, But something new is coming. A place where we can bask in the awesomeness of God And the beauty of God's creations.

But here's the thing,
Cathedral builders didn't just look for the completed project.
They worked.
Climbed sketchy ladders to the sky
Lifted stone upon stone,
Maybe to see one wall finished in a lifetime
And somehow, they made meaning out of that.
Each small step gave glory to God
Before anyone could worship in the final product
Each played a role in giving glory to God.
Perhaps they didn't worry about whether the big building would be finished.
But trusted that each step, each stone, was important.

At the end of the first meeting of this year's confirmation class,
The students submitted anonymous questions they had
About becoming members of the church and what that might mean for their lives.
Upon reading them, one theme stood out to me:

**Does God have a plan?
Does God have a plan for me?
If so, how do I know what it is?**

We've all asked that question, right? - How do I know what God wants for my life?

And I find this question so hard to answer,
Because while there are some sure things I know about God –
That God loves me,
and God loves you,
and God will never leave any of us we even when we're total Angry Mobster idiots –
I also know that God is totally beyond me and my limited understanding.

I sorta think God has a plan,
But I can't really see exactly what it looks like or how the next moment will unfold,
Or especially how things will really be in the end.

So I can do is trust that there is a plan.

All I can do is try to keep my ears open in the moment -
Even to things that challenge the status quo.
Even to things that are kinda strange - or kinda scary

All I can do is find next stone
pick it up
And use it not to tear down,
But to glorify God.

Trusting that in the end, the vision will become a reality.
Maybe in working stone by stone
My whole life, over time, is laid down for my faith.

Listen for the prophets.
There may be some here in this congregation.
Some word of challenge that scared you
But stirred you up.

Listen for the prophets calling you
To pick up just the next stone.
It may be heavy
It may be hard work
It may involve waking up at before 8am on a Saturday to paint the town
Or getting up the nerve to talk to a stranger
It may involve doing something your friends think is a little different
Or trying something you haven't done before.

But it's just this one stone for now.
And then you'll find the next.

Stone by stone
our lives are laid down.

Stone by stone

The kingdom is built
And God's vision becomes a reality.

Amen
And Amen.